LoM GoM's Fact Sheet #001

The Digging Stick: Can You Dig It?

Background:
The development and use of hand tools marks a turning point in the history of man. I'm not referring to the latest and greatest power tool, but primitive technology! Amazingly, many cultures left isolated from the industrial revolution continued to use wooden tools until converging patterns of trade and exploration made the world smaller. Even more amazing, there are presently some indigenous cultures living the old way and using only what mother nature provides. Then of course, there are the bushcraft and survival practitioners like you and me who "dig" the primitive technology and wish to keep it alive.

Construction:
Digging sticks are best made from green hardwood. Osage Orange, Hop Hornbeam, Oak, Beech and Plum are just a few of the proven woods for tool making. To start, you should look for a section of tree, straight if possible but not necessary, about 2 to 3 feet in length. I prefer the longer style as I don't want to bend down as far when I use it. Make sure your section is anywhere from 1.5" to 3" wide. There is no exact width necessary and everyone will have a personal preference to what size stick they use. Just remember, the tool will be heavier the longer and wider it is. After your section is cut, you need to make the wider end the digging end. You will have to taper the end starting about 9" to 12" back from the tip. Do not simply make a shallow taper as this will make digging harder. You want as little material in the way to create drag as you dig deeper. Don't remove all the bark as this will provide grip. I prefer making my tip in the center of the wood near the heart wood. You can also make it a wedge shape tapering from one side to the other. Try to make the carved section as smooth as possible and keep it a consistent thickness. Once you have carved your wooden tool to your liking, you need to fire-harden it for best results. This process rapidly removes moisture from the wood using heat. To do this, you need to insert the digging portion of your stick into the ashes of your fire (please read ashes, not coals!) The ashes will be very hot but there will be no oxygen within. Without oxygen your wooden digging stick will not burn. Genius right? For this fact sheets digging stick, I left mine in the ashes for 30 minutes. The length of time you leave it in for will vary.

Use:
The beauty of the digging stick is how well it works, considering what it is. Sure, I occasionally slowly probe (going against many suggestions) with my knife in rich soil for various edible plant roots. I would never do this in anything rocky or sandy as it could potentially damage my most important tool. With the digging stick, I don't have to worry as I can always carve another. To use it, you can either probe slowly around the intended plant root for harvesting or jab it aggressively in the ground like a shovel. Keep in mind, it is a wooden tool and it will not take the same aggressive prying motions as its steel counterparts. It will also wear quickly if used in rocky soil. The benefit of this type of tool comes in the deep but small diameter holes it can make. It leaves a minimal trace and doesn't disrupt the soil as much as a wide shovel! On a recent course, one friend on mine State side found a section of tree with a crook forming a natural foot rest. He used it effectively to gather Indian Cucumber and wild leeks. Ultimately, you can modify your tool to your personal style. If you can't carry a small spade, trowel or shovel, you will have the know how to make a digging tool when you need it.

Good luck and happy foraging.

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